

Board will not turn over public safety operations to the state without a vote

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Photo. SIMON HARE

If Josephine County is handing jail operations to the State of Oregon, it'll do so with a vote of the people, commissioners said during Wednesday's business meeting.

The Board of Commissioners has been mulling over funding solutions for the county's public safety system for the last few weeks, spurred by fears that declining payments from the federal government may soon run out.

One of the most controversial options is invoking a provision in House Bill 3453, a 2013 law passed by the state Legislature that would allow the board to hand over jail operations and funding to the state. [emphasis added]

Commissioners Simon Hare and Cheryl Walker said they wouldn't ask the governor to intervene without first asking permission from voters. Along with fellow Commissioner Keith Heck, the board is considering an **advisory question** [emphasis added] for the May ballot that asks voters if they'd support the move.

"I believe that decision is above my pay grade," Hare said. "If I were to make a decision to pull the trigger on **(House Bill) 3453** [emphasis added]... I would be doing everybody a disservice. I think the people should make the decision for that."

The commissioners concede that they likely know what voters would decide at the ballot. But, like Hare, they contend it's not their decision to make.

"It is an option that is out there," Walker said. "And I think the reason for putting it on as an **advisory question** even though we think we know the answer is that it's something the people should decide."

In other business Wednesday, the Board of Commissioners approved new union contracts and shifted personnel at three different departments.

Among the changes agreed upon by the union's bargaining unit and J.J. Scofield, the county's head of human resources, is a freeze on cost of living increases for the first two years of an employee's tenure. Salary adjustments from there on will be awarded based on the rate of inflation.

The new union contract also cuts the number of salary tiers from 12 to nine in an effort to simplify the department's pay structure.

Commissioner Simon Hare lauded Scofield's efforts at the bargaining table.

"I certainly appreciate the job that you did in negotiating with these members to understand the fiscal realities of what we're facing now and in the future," he said.

The three commissioners also approved the \$137,782 renewal of a grant for victim services administered through the District Attorney's Office. The program was the only one to draw an audience reaction during the public comment — Scofield told the commissioners that the program helped his family when his wife was rear-ended in a car crash last year.

"When you're been the victim of a crime, you're lost," he said. "And in our case, our car was totaled."

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